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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 002046

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [PINR](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: CAN HUMOR BEAT CHAVEZ?

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Classified By: Robert Richard Downes, Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(b).

Summary

¶1. (C) While the "serious" opposition candidates quibble over who will face President Hugo Chavez, Venezuelan super-comedian Benjamin Rausseo is mulling over a tongue-in-cheek presidential bid. Despite his plans to make a "three month fiesta" out of the campaign, Rausseo, known to Venezuelans as the "El Conde del Guacharo" for the hayseed satirical character he made famous, is a successful businessman from beginnings more humble than Chavez himself. As a career comedian, Rausseo doesn't have much by way of political strategies, but he has assembled a team of advisors to help him try to convert his celebrity status into political power. El Conde's biting humor would be a stark contrast to the gray, sour faces of the Bolivarian Revolution, a political movement badly in need of a sense of humor. Even if Rausseo's campaign doesn't capture the attention of Venezuelan voters, his presence could lighten up the campaign, and even knock Chavez off balance now and then.
End summary.

¶2. (C) At the invitation of radio journalist Pedro Penzini, Poloff met with Benjamin "El Conde del Guacharo" Rausseo over lunch June 28 at the Caracas Country Club. Jose Luis Chacon, former Tachira state head of the Accion Democratica (AD) party, also attended, as did opposition member Humberto Anzola and one of Rausseo's personal advisors. Rumors of El Conde's presidential bid had been circulating in the press in recent months; Chavez even joked earlier in the year that the opposition's only hope was "El Conde."

The Count of Guacharo

13. (U) Rausseo was born in the rural state of Monagas in 1961. His stand-up comedy act began a meteoric rise more than 20 years ago when he began playing the character called, "El Conde del Guacharo." (Literally, "The Count of Oilbird," named after a large and loud nocturnal bird indigenous to Venezuela that sleeps in caves.) With his backwoods "royalty" title, Rausseo makes fun of all aspects of Venezuelan life, including politics. He is known for crude and vulgar humor associated with Venezuela's countryside (think, "Beverly Hillbillies" meets "Cheech and Chong"). Rausseo, or "El Conde" as he is known on the street, became famous via a weekly television show, musical albums (he plays the four-stringed "cuatro"), and a series of recorded standup routines. Venezuela being a haven for copyright violators, pirated versions of El Conde's albums are sold widely at informal markets throughout the country, giving him a natural connection with millions of Venezuela's lower socio-economic classes ("C, D, E, ... all the way to Z," says El Conde). Rausseo has studied English in the United States (though he's pretty rusty) and frequently performs there. He has a degree in business and said he is finishing a law degree this year. He also owns a theme park on Margarita Island.

From Count To Prez

14. (C) Rausseo told Poloff he began thinking seriously several months ago about a presidential bid after his name started appearing as a possible dark horse candidate in the press. He said he is tired of seeing his country "dismantled" by the current government and wants to re-institute democratic government and an open economy. He formed an exploratory committee of a few journalist and politician friends. Chacon said he had floated El Conde's

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candidacy with several senior AD members and suggested that portions of the party might support him. Rausseo said he has his own money to stake a presidential bid, though others have also offered to finance him. When asked about his position on the United States, Rausseo said, "Two of my children are U.S. citizens. How can I fight with them?" He had less-than-adept answers to other questions, however, such as what he would do about Cuba if he became president.

15. (C) El Conde said he is in the process of forming a party so he can register as a candidate. The party is named "Partido Independiente Electoral Democratico de Respuesta Avanzada" ("The Independent Electoral Democratic Party of Advanced Response," or PIEDRA by its Spanish acronym, which means "Stone.") Displaying his famous double-entendre humor, El Conde said his campaign slogan will be "Vota PIEDRA," or "Vote PIEDRA," which in Venezuelan Spanish is phonetically equivalent to saying "pass a kidney stone," but is also a slang expression for getting ticked off (Believe us, Venezuelans we tell this to laugh out loud!). Rausseo said his plan was to half-joke publicly about his comical candidacy until the last possible day to register -- he wasn't sure that day was -- and, if conditions are favorable, to turn his satirical bit into a serious bid. Rausseo said he would run a positive campaign full of humor, calling the campaign season "a three-month fiesta."

El Conde Verses El Rey Hugo

16. (C) Chacon said the exploratory committee commissioned a survey to see what Venezuelans thought of El Conde. The results were very positive, with 100-percent name recognition, even among the poorest classes. Chacon said that El Conde can enter any barrio in Venezuela and be accepted without fearing for his safety, something that even Chavez cannot do without multiple rings of security. Penzini

asserted that Rausseo would be immune to Chavez' trademark attacks that his opponents are rich oligarchs. Penzini noted that while Chavez' hails from poor Barinas state, the President was at least the child of schoolteachers. Rausseo's mother was a laundress. When Poloff pointed out that a lunch at the Country Club did not seem like a place for a "man of the people" they were making Rausseo out to be, Penzini said the point is to show Venezuelans that they ought to have the opportunity to improve their lives. Rausseo said he wanted to spread a positive message that if he could make it, they could too. (Note: During the lunch, a stream of well-wishers stopped by, comprised both of the affluent clientele and of the wait staff. Coincidentally, one waiter asked if Rausseo remembered him: the two had once waited tables together at a nearby seafood restaurant.) Rausseo said he had never joined an opposition political party or signed a petition against Chavez. That said, his humor frequently attacks the government to the point, El Conde added, that his televised comedy spectacular a week earlier had been pre-empted by a Chavez obligatory broadcast. Rausseo noted that he looks a lot like Chavez in complexion and facial feature, only much better looking (Note: Poloff expressed no opinion).

A Revolution Lacking A Funny Bone

"Nothing is more curious than the almost savage hostility that humor excites in those who lack it." -- George
Saintsbury

¶7. (C) Once upon a time, Venezuelans were thought to be a funny group. But years of acrimonious Chavez rants have mutated humor into a Frankenstein fusion of satire, meanness, and revenge. The Bolivarian Revolution, sadly, is not funny. Chavista newspapers are filled with comics that only deliver

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political sledgehammers on the heads (not even an occasional pie in the face) of the opposition. Or VTV's La Hojilla host Mario Silva laughs endlessly and non-sensically about some news clip from the opposition, but never about his own people. Laughing at oneself may be a self-effacing act of humility, but to apply it to the sacrosanct Revolution would be a traitorous sign of weakness. So, no Chavez trying to figure out what the hell "Mision Macarena" is. Nor a Juan Barreto betting the other Caracas municipal mayors that he is indeed "master of his domain." Even an Isaias-Rodriguez-as-Uncle-Fester routine would at least make the Chavistas tolerable. A healthy dose of light-hearted humor, we speculate, would be like a virus to the cold Bolivarian propaganda machine.

Comment

¶8. (C) While El Conde's campaign is probably a non-starter -- El Conde has the name but not much else when it comes to organization or backing. While he won't steal the football from the main opposition candidates, we wouldn't rule out a fumble recovery. Chavez did, after all, take serious competition from a former Miss Universe in 1998. That said, we sure would like to see him run. If anything, El Conde's homespun humor could land potshots directly within the Chavez camp. And, we suspect, Chavez would be hard pressed to return fire against a fellow famous "criollo." We intend to maintain quiet contact with El Conde to see how his campaign "stands up." He might prove to be the only opposition presidential candidate with whom we could maintain a public relationship without provoking a Chavista explosion.

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